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U.S. Was Warned Of Bombing at Beirut Embassy

U.S. intelligence agencies received warnings a month in advance that Iranian-backed terrorists planned to bomb the American Embassy in Beirut. Yet nothing was done to beef up security at the building where 17 Americans were killed.

This shocking admission is contained in the super-secret National Intelligence Daily, a document circulated to fewer than 100 high-level U.S. officials. An autopsy of the Beirut bombing appeared in the April 20 edition—two days after the tragedy and one day after the Islamic Jihad Organization claimed responsibility for the blast.

Though the report itself is classified above top-secret, it was reviewed by my associate Dale Van Atta. Here's the appalling story:

The National Security Agency's code breakers had intercepted some alarming communications in the Middle East. These gave a clear indication that a pro-Iranian Shiite Moslem group, fanatically loyal to Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, was planning to bomb the embassy in Beirut.

At the same time, the CIA, which lost seven people in the bombing, had gathered "humint," or human intelligence, which warned that the same group had plans to bomb the embassy.

According to the intelligence report, preparations for the bomb attack were supervised by a high official in the Iranian Foreign Ministry, who also gave final approval. It was assumed that Khomeini also knew of the plan and approved it.

The admission that both the NSA and the CIA had prior warning of the bombing was hedged with suggestions that the intelligence information could not be verified, and in at least one case came from an untested source.

But this alibi has a hollow ring. Not only had the Islamic Jihad shown itself to be a terrorist group that should be taken seriously, but the CIA had been keeping track of the Jihad and other Khomeini-backed groups for a year or more. For example:

- The Islamic Jihad claimed responsibility for a car-bomb explosion—the same kind of attack as that of April 18—that killed 12 people at the French Embassy in Beirut a year ago.

- It also took responsibility for grenade and machine-gun attacks on American and Italian troops of the multinational peace-keeping force in

Beirut last March. The toll: one Italian killed and five Americans wounded. And it claimed to have taken shots at members of the French peace-keeping force, a few days before the U.S. Embassy blast.

- The Jihad is an offshoot of the mainstream Shiite paramilitary organization Amal. The original leader, Musa al Sadre, was a Khomeini disciple who disappeared on a 1978 trip to Libya. The Jihad is closely associated with an estimated 1,000 Iranian revolutionary guards who have proclaimed an "Islamic-Khomeinist state" at Baalbek in northeastern Lebanon.

CIA reports over the past year list several cases of Khomeini's attempts to export his revolution beyond Iran's borders:

- An attempt to set up an Islamic state in Turkey through the Iranian consulate in Istanbul.

- A planned coup by 60 Bahrainis, many trained in Iran, to take over that Persian Gulf state.

- A meeting in Cyprus of Saudi Arabian opposition leaders to plot infiltration of the military, incitement of the large Shiite minority and eventual overthrow of the royal family.

- Financing of secret trips by Moslem students to Iran for revolutionary training. The students are then smuggled back to their homelands to await the signal for uprising.